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# Curating 'northernness' in Neolithic Orkney: a contemporary monumental biography

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The Neolithic landscapes of the Orkney Islands were legitimated as authentic material fabrics with intrinsic links to the advent of farming in Northwest Europe and the development of the Scottish nation when they were collectively inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) in 1999. Recently, the management and planning policies that were designed to ensure its material and aesthetic maintenance were challenged by a proposal for the construction of a wind farm to be built within view of three of the four monuments that constitute the site. The justification for this development was itself philosophically linked to discourses of 'conservation', related in particular to concepts of environmental and 'community' sustainability. The proposal was bitterly debated and ultimately rejected by a Scottish Government Enquiry on grounds that the aesthetic authenticity of the site would be compromised if the farm were to be constructed, and therefore put its World Heritage status in question. This paper presents a brief history of the ways in which the arguments about the aesthetics perceived to be under threat at the site, as well as justifications for the development of the wind farm, both drew historical and political cache from the deployment of particular aesthetic categories of 'northernness' that have been cultivated in relation to Orkney in particular, and Scotland more generally, over the last two centuries.

## INTRODUCTION

It is a particularly interesting time to examine discourses and cultural practices surrounding conservation and regeneration in relation to Scotland's landscapes. The current Scottish National Party (SNP) led Scottish Government is seeking secession from the United Kingdom (UK) in 2014, and has been outlining its plans to persuade the public that the country is capable of self-governance and economic independence in a series of party manifestos posted across various forms of Scottish media. In proclamations related to economic independence, the SNP – as well as a number of other social actors and political parties interested in secession – have placed the country's primary natural resources, including oil, gas and renewable energy sources drawn from its 'rich' landscape and climate, as well as its 'cultural' resources, in particular its history and heritage, at the centre of future economic plans (Glasgow Herald 9 May 2013, 18). To justify their agenda, the social actors involved in the campaign construct and frame their arguments about how and why Scotland would be successful as an independent nation in terms of the ways in which the needs of the nation's people, their cultural values, politics and the landscape, require a form of 'local' governance that departs from agendas that are seen to be 'London-centric', or driven by what it regards to be 'southern' interests.

The deployment of aesthetic 'northernness' as a vehicle to signify Scotland's historic, cultural and socioeconomic distinction from England specifically, and the UK more generally, is, of course, nothing new. Tropes and cultural imaginaries that situate the country and its various histories and identities in direct opposition to its traditional 'southern' rival, in ways that tend to emphasise what are perceived to be their essential 'northern' qualities – remoteness, the possession of barren, 'harsh' landscapes and climates – as well as associations with Scandinavian language and culture, have abounded in literary

and historical accounts for over 300 years (Malley 2001), outlined both by those who resided or reside both within or outside the country's shifting geographic boundaries. These legacies are as popular as ever within various forms of contemporary popular culture, as has been discussed at length by authors like David McCrone, Morris, and Kiely (1995), and by several contributors to this special issue.

Peter Davidson's (2005) notable description of Scotland as viewed 'from the south' in his oft cited volume *The Idea of North* also refers to an exaggerated sense of regional differentiation in relation to Scotland's place in the UK. 'Scotland is inevitably hyperborean', he says, 'lying beyond the imaginative (industrial English) north' (2005, 233, emphasis mine). He goes on to say that:

This is a landscape formed by (indeed, emptied by) lawlessness and remoteness . . . Scotland seen from the south is a place of dearth: a mean, negligible land. This is a necessary mythology from the early seventeenth century Union of the Crowns onwards. In all places that define themselves as a 'south', there is a need to believe that whatever lies to the north is the place of hunger and savage weather, so that the 'south' can congratulate itself on its relative ease and prosperity. This mythology was built on periods of famine and financial instability in the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. It was supported by the apparent lack of Scottish cultural production in any sphere outside architecture and the visual arts (this lack is being proved to be more and more delusive) and by the institutionalized philistinism of Calvinist theocracy. The unchanging Scottish reluctance to be assimilated into the southern kingdom has supported the development of these myths of poverty.

Davidson's summation is certainly reminiscent of the ways in which the Northern Isles of Scotland, the landscapes that are at the heart of this article, have been represented and marshalled in discourses of history, cultural identity, heritage and politics. In Orkney and Shetland, both geographic and cultural 'remoteness' from traditional centres of political 'power' in Scotland, and in the UK more generally, are viewed as symbolic and where historical political links with Norse culture and language are understood to be part and parcel of the islands' deep historical past, as well as contemporary cultural identities. Using a range of methods drawn particularly from anthropology, this article explores how people understand, engage with and articulate the historical biographies of these sites, how their aesthetic 'authenticity' is judged, and the potential for that authenticity to facilitate various forms of social capital which ensure future security and recapitulate the identities of the communities living amongst them. To assemble this history, I sketch out a biographical portrait of the Stones of Stenness, one of the main Orcadian WHS monuments, which examines the way it has been framed and represented as embodying a particular kind of 'northern otherness' in nineteenth-century literature, twentieth-century archaeological, conservation and carnivalesque practices, as well as in twenty-first-century mass media. I then go on to explore arguments that frame the landscapes of Orkney as remote, elemental and resource-rich, with the potential to generate a significant centre for the production of renewable energy, which is also a still emerging trope of northernness, recognisable in global terms relating especially to landscapes including the circumpolar North, Canada and regions of Northeastern Europe. Both of these are particularly germane as the 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence approaches, and similar issues are once again at the

centre of social and political debate. Exploring these case studies, their temporal relationships to the past and the future, and way they are negotiated and used to inform social action in the present, also adds to our understanding of the role of both rural and urban historic landscapes in the production of meaning and place.

#### MATERIALITY, MEANING AND PLACE IN HISTORIC ORKNEY

Examining the relationship between the ways in which archaeological remains have been central to the production of identity, meaning and place has become commonplace in the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology over the last three decades or so. In the introduction to the widely cited 1987 volume *Anthropology at Home*, Anthony Jackson (1987, 6) spoke of the disciplinary chasms he believed to exist between anthropologists and their archaeological colleagues in European contexts:

The rather tenuous relationship that exists between anthropology and archaeology becomes a liability when anthropologists do research at home, because it becomes important to enquire what people think about their local history. The European landscape, in particular, is strewn with remnants of the past and these form part of the experience Europeans have of themselves.

'It is the task of the archaeologist to explain the past', he continued, 'and the social anthropologist to explain the local folk models of the past: the two are interrelated . . . so why should anthropologists not extend an invitation to archaeologists to talk things over?'

Nearly 30 years on from the publication of *Anthropology at Home*, both anthropology and archaeology have seen an exponential increase of scholarly interest in the role of the material past in the production of contemporary cultural identities, including nationalisms, sexualities, postcolonial politics, economies and so on. Most recently, the use of ethnographic methods to empirically examine people's engagement with archaeological materials – whether in museums or landscape contexts – has emerged, resulting in a plethora of projects and publications that engage with the ways in which material culture shapes the way we understand ourselves and our surroundings (Basu 2007; Edgeworth 2006; Fontein 2006; Gable and Handler 1997; Jones 2004; Macdonald 2009; McClanahan 2004, 2007, 2013; Moser 2003; Smith and Waterton 2009). In addition to this kind of work, heritage management practices themselves are now widely viewed as a set of highly constructed cultural practices (Howard 1993; Stanley-Price, Talley, and Vaccaro 1996), and are therefore seen to be worthy of ethnographic scrutiny, raising important questions in their own right. In the case of Neolithic Orkney, we might ask: how do modern conservation and interpretation practices perpetuate romantic views of cultural identity in Scottish history and culture at a time when efforts to emphasise the economic value of industrial expansion and tourist practices are high on political agendas? How do the appearances of historic sites impact on people's understanding of them? Is the effort to ascribe a fixed appearance to historical fabrics viewed as a barrier or complementary to planning strategies, architectural innovation and the practice of everyday life in contemporary Scotland?

In order to engage with some of these questions, I draw from ethnographic materials arising from work I completed in the Orkney Islands over the course of one year from 2001 to 2002 that examined how people engaged with archaeological monuments in the islands, as well as historic documentation including use of photographs, archives and field notes to sketch out a 'biography' of the Stones of Stenness henge monument. Together, these help to provide a prism through which to view how the monument embodies many of the qualities of 'northern otherness' as discussed above.

The Heart of Neolithic Orkney (HONO) World Heritage Site (WHS), is a famed assemblage of 5000-year-old structures, including settlements, tombs and associated monuments, and is located in the western half of the largest island in the Orkney archipelago, around seven miles north of the tip of the Scottish mainland. It is renowned in archaeological terms for its high levels of 'authenticity' and preservation, as well as its importance in relation to the origins and cultures of some of the first settlers in the British Isles, and Northwest Europe more generally (Historic Scotland [1999](#), [2002](#), [2005](#), [2008](#)). It is also celebrated both historically and contemporarily for the aesthetics of its landscapes, their 'dramatic', windswept, treeless, 'northern' settings and the iconic status of its Neolithic monuments within archaeological history, which also tend to be viewed as symbols that are associated with the myths and origins of Scottish nationhood.

With its wealth of archaeological monuments from the Neolithic period onwards, and its historical Scandinavian connections, Orkney is often perceived as being remote and unusual in comparison to Scotland's Gaelic-speaking Highland and west coast island communities; more 'northern' in disposition, aesthetics and position within the world. The histories of both Orkney and Shetland, as well as their linguistic and material associations with 'Viking' and Scandinavian traditions mean that their cultural traditions depart from the familiar 'Gaelic, tartan and bagpipe' image so often associated with Scottish identity today (Ashmore, this volume; McCrone, Morris, and Kiely [1995](#), 50–56). Neither set of Islands ever operated under a 'clan' system, both are geographically closer to Norway than to Edinburgh, hundreds of their place names are Scandinavian in origin, and their accents are very distinctive from their Scottish counterparts. Although just as 'modern' as other British communities, the people of Orkney are often perceived by 'outsiders' and sometimes marketed by themselves, as 'having a culture' in which 'tradition' and history are still visible and 'important' to islanders' identities.

The Stones of Stenness is emblematic in many ways of the islands' aesthetic 'otherly' qualities that I argue are part and parcel of a visual trope of 'northernness'. Situated near Maeshowe passage tomb, the ring of stones regularly features in affective images portraying the islands' deep, ancient past in atmospheric photographs and renderings that emphasise the grey tone of the stone, usually against the backdrop of greyish, fierce looking skies, and usually, notably, without the presence of people lingering or looking at the monument in the frame. Archaeologists believe that the monument originally featured a circle of 12 stones, of which only four remain standing. The site was ploughed until recent times and the ditch has long filled (the present ditch and banks are the result of modern

landscaping). The stones themselves, however, are tall and strikingly thin, with the tallest stone standing nearly six metres high. Many are angular at their tops, and are visible from the main road running between Stromness and Kirkwall (the A965), as well as from the Ring of Brodgar and Maeshowe.

Likewise, the standing stones making up the Ring of Brodgar are visible from the Stones of Stenness. The monument is thought to date sometime around 3000 BC, and is still sometimes referred to by some as a 'Temple of the Moon', as it was popularly referred to in historical documents, and indeed in Office of Works documents, in the early twentieth century.

During excavations to examine a peculiar reconstruction of a 'dolmen' structure at the Stones of Stenness in the mid-1970s, Graham Ritchie (1976) researched historical accounts of the monument in an effort to piece together acts of both destruction and 'restoration' that had affected the physical state of the henge over time. He found that several eighteenth-century travellers had sketched illustrations of the stones, and had described them in diaries, providing certain clues about the monument's depiction, appearance and treatment through space and time. Ritchie came across a particular literary passage that seemed, according to both contemporary and historical accounts, to have had immense bearing on the curation of the site at the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1814, the much celebrated Scots novelist, Walter Scott, visited the Orkney and Shetland Islands. The highly visible monuments of alien cultures that Scott encountered in Orkney, the Norn language and accent he heard, and the cultural history of the islands led Scott to perceive the islands as greatly 'otherly', and bound by their historical ties to what he imagined to be dark, pagan traditions of the Norse-Viking ancestors of Orcadians. Scott's observations about the monument inspired a myth around the site that would later manifest itself in heritage management practice and forms of social commentary, satire and resistance in the twentieth century. A passage in Scott's *Memoirs*, dated 16 August 1814, read: 'About the centre of the semicircle is a broad flat stone, probably once the altar on which human victims were sacrificed' (Scott 1814 quoted in Ritchie 1976, 5). Scott's assumption of prehistoric sacrifice appeared in his 1821 novel *The Pirate*, part of his romantic histories in which the climactic ending takes place at the Stones of Stenness, where reference to a 'sacrificial altar' is made. When the monument was taken into the protective care of the state in 1906, in accordance with the 1882 Ancient Monuments Act, the Office of Works, the agency then responsible for conserving and maintaining Scotland's archaeological monuments, was assigned the duty of 'repairing' the site for presentation. By this time, Scott's reputation as a romantic nationalist had swept the country, and his highly emotive literature was seen by many to 'embody' an authentic version of Scotland.

Taking Scott's assumption that the cromlech would certainly have been a part of the Stones of Stenness, the Office of Works took the large, flat stone which had lain recumbent for nearly a century in the middle of the monument, and mounted it on the two stones which were thought to have 'supported' it, thereby constructing a dolmen (Ritchie 1976, 3).

During one interview, I was lucky enough to have been narrated an account of a highly symbolic satirical public act that revolved around the myth of the imitation structure. In 1954, a tongue-in-cheek story in the popular national tabloid *Empire News* referenced Scott's allusion to the practice of paganism at the Stones of Stenness to argue that ritual practices featured in the daily lives of Orkney's inhabitants. The author claimed that the Stones of Stenness was used as a sacrificial offering site during the summer solstice in the contemporary village of Stenness. 'A girl was sacrificed on a devil's altar', the headline read, and went on to describe the rite in detail, noting its ferocity, as well as stating that such acts were never recorded to have taken place at Stonehenge, the Southerly archaeological equivalent to the Neolithic monuments of Orkney. The obvious implications of the article are that Orkney's inhabitants were backward, barbaric and distant from 'civilised' society, descended temporally and spatially from generations of inhabitants that were surrounded by harsh climates and landscapes; typically viewed, according to authors like Davidson, as inhabiting a strange, northerly place of dearth.

Letters expressing outrage as well as humorous anecdotes about the article appeared in *The Orcadian* in the following weeks. The article implied that Orkney's inhabitants practised the dark arts of witchcraft and devil worship. Many of Orkney's residents, however, found the story amusing, and worthy of satire. As a result, seven farmers from the parish of Stenness decided to enter a float in the annual Stromness Shopping Week<sup>1</sup> parade, poking fun at the story and effectively re-appropriating the negative connotations of the article, turning it around to re-claim the symbolic imagery associated with the monument. The float went on to win first prize in the Shopping Week parade for its satire of the national media. Nearly 20 years later, the 'cromlech' of Stenness was inexplicably destroyed in an event that is to this day highly mythologised in folk memory. Ritchie (1976) mentioned the event briefly in his excavation report, but the local story goes that in 1972, an Orkney native, disgruntled with the modern invention, which was seen to represent associations with Sir Walter Scott and the Romantic Nationalist literary movement, pulled the structure down using a chain and a tractor. Ritchie's investigations at the Stones of Stenness in 1973–74, which encompassed geophysical survey and partial excavation of the site, revealed one of the upright stones set in concrete which had supported the 'capstone'. This stone was removed, and the 'capstone' was replaced flat on the ground, in line with where it appeared in early illustrations of the monument (Ritchie, personal communication to Sally Foster, 2003). As such, the way the monument looks today is in line as much as it can be with the earliest known records of its appearance.

The existence of this narrative is interesting in and of itself; that Walter Scott should find the islands' material culture worthy of fiction that casts Orkney's inhabitants in such an awkward, 'otherly' light, in contrast to similar Neolithic monuments in the UK no doubt contributed to the historic notion of Orkney – and the Northern Isles more generally – as exotic, pagan and decidedly strange in comparison to more 'central' areas of Scotland and the UK. However, that the story was relayed to me by interview respondents and informants at all – indeed, on several occasions – was also significant in pointing to

the importance of this story in relation to how many Orcadians have appropriated such mythology, and their 'otherly', northern aesthetic, to their satirical advantage.

## THE CASE OF THE MERRANBLO WIND FARM

This section of the article moves from discussing the aesthetics of one of the individual World Heritage Site monuments in Orkney, to examine a case in which classic aesthetics of Northernness as discussed above – emptiness, harsh climate, lack of development – were challenged in relation to three of the monuments in that complex by a wind farm developer who proposed a project which would have led to overtly 'modern' structures being erected in what many perceive to be an aesthetically ancient landscape. In 2007, a private land owner living near the HONO site submitted a planning application to the Orkney Islands Council which outlined plans for the construction of three wind turbines in the Merranblo region of the Orkney Mainland. The landscape where the site would be situated was within view of the Ring of Brodgar, Maeshowe and, of course, the Stones of Stenness. The developer, along with a Scottish renewable energy firm, proposed that the enterprise would be partially community-owned, in that 10 per cent of profits from the eco-efficient energy generated by the three large, white 900KW turbines would go to the community immediately surrounding the site. Objectors to the development of the site, including local, national and international cultural and natural heritage conservation agencies and organisations (including UNESCO), as well as local authority and academic archaeologists and community interest groups, argued that such a development would threaten the very 'values' upon which the site was inscribed. The aesthetics and authenticity of the monuments, they claimed, would be destroyed if the turbines were to be erected.

This conflict generated highly contentious arguments amongst all interested parties, and was steeped in moral rhetoric on both 'sides' from the outset about what the priorities of 'conservation' should be within a contemporary society that is concerned both with its history and heritage, but also the well-being of its future inhabitants. The various 'values' the site is claimed to embody in terms of its narrative worth to human history and origins, and its 'value' as a generator of tourism within the Orkney community (boosted by World Heritage status), were publically set against arguments about the role and 'moral' responsibility that both the Orkney community and the Scottish nation should have in promoting and providing resources for renewable energy, how the economic future of the community and 'culture' could be ensured (and indeed, 'conserved') through the profits generated by the wind farm, and the role its members should play in deciding what happened to the development in the consultation process. All of these arguments draw in some way on tropes of northernness as discussed above, as well as in many of the volumes and discourse around ideas of 'North' cited here and elsewhere in this issue. The planning application for the Merranblo project was eventually rejected by the Orkney Islands Council, owing to the disruption that such a material intervention would cause to the WHS, which, according to conservation specialists from the International Council on Monuments and Sites, would potentially put the WHS status of the HONO under threat.



Drawing on the idea that WHSs are often used, appropriated and represented as a kind of 'aesthetic commons' that can be used to impact on the lives of those who live amongst them, I want now to discuss how heritage managers, community groups, archaeologists and developers argued for and against the rejection or acceptance of the project. Because of the high profile of the case, various community interests, and the public outcry involved in the submission and review of the Merranblo project planning application, an official public inquiry was launched by the Scottish Government to examine the arguments outlined in relation to the case in January 2008.

Throughout the course of the inquiry, community members, heritage managers and agencies, members of local government and the developers of the proposed wind farm site, aired their views to a public audience. Specialists from ICOMOS UK were brought in to defend the aesthetic, visual values of the WHS, as were academic archaeologists from universities around the UK. On the other hand, specialists from renewable energy companies, local community members, as well as heritage 'experts' also defended the morality of placing a development that would benefit both the local community in terms of wealth generation through profit-making from 'selling' the energy, as well as humanity at large in the longer term, in Orkney. All of the arguments, whether for or against the development, had interesting points in common: that their invocation of the kinds of social capital described related to the common good. How, then, were these arguments (and the way they are publicly, discursively contested) tied to ideas about 'northernness', community, society and culture?

Those in favour of the development used the economic benefits of 'community' wealth generation and hybrid 'ownership' via the social capital generated largely by private enterprise which would ensure community cooperation and potential growth, in a very similar vein to the way in which 'frontier' economies of energy are being discussed in northerly regions of Canada (Blomgren 2011). The developer, speaking in the local newspaper *The Orcadian* (11 October 2007), said:

Orkney has a tremendous wind resource. We are trying to do it as a local developer keeping the revenue within Orkney to help the Orkney economy. You have to look at the balance of economic benefit, community benefit and the visual impact. Those against the project argued against it, invoking the highly rhetorical lexicon of UNESCO policy and analysis, including that any development that threatened the aesthetic, 'universal value' of a public (government owned) commons which attracts tourism and profit should be rejected on the basis that common good is under threat.

A letter to another local paper, *Orkney Today* (11 October 2007), reads:

Some people don't seem to realise that given current form, the people of Orkney and all businesses that benefit from our vital tourist industry in particular, have more to lose than

gain. For example, do we want to risk having the World Heritage Site designation stripped from the Heart of Neolithic Orkney? Surely not.

Such arguments were also posed by ICOMOS UK, in a statement submitted to the inquiry outlining its position on how the wind turbines might impact upon the setting of the WHS. Discussing the site's 'universal values' in overtly humanist terms, Denyer (in 'Objectors state their case at Merranblo Inquiry', in Orkney Today 25 January 2008) argued that '[t]he monuments of Orkney . . . Encapsulate . . . the ability of the visual attributes of the landscapes to have "profound effects on psyche and disposition"'.

Arguing for a more overtly utilitarian approach to cultural conservation, that is, for ensuring the 'sustainability' of the Orkney community by securing its financial future, those in favour of the project argued that profit generated for the Orkney community via the Merranblo development would keep the 'community' profitable, modern, alive and dynamic in the face of collapsing traditional industries associated with the North, like agriculture and fishing; that it would boost the role of Scotland as a nation and 'a people' in the burgeoning 'sustainable energy industry'; and that it would demonstrate Scotland's environmental awareness, concern and compassion in a within a globalised world threatened by climate change. As a 'heritage consultant', in a consultation document submitted to Historic Scotland, Lynn made the following point:

At the Stenness consultation event, a venerable and respected Orcadian with an immense pride in their heritage and no windfarm involvement whispered to me that the colonial imperialists had returned again. My impression is that this is an opinion held by many Orcadians in relation to the WHS proposals, and it should be treated as a serious message to avoid any possible future backlash against the continuation of the WHS from the people whose lives would be affected by its implementation.

Yet another strand of arguments featuring in the Merranblo case are appeals to differing notions of 'authenticity' and 'identity', concepts that are central to and valued highly by heritage organisations like UNESCO and ICOMOS, as well as featuring as a theme in what many visitors seemed to say about the HONO. In 'After Authenticity at an American Heritage Site', a classic text based on ethnographic work at the Colonial Williamsburg site in the United States (1996), Gable and Handler claim that:

Heritage is one form of cultural salvage. A 'lost world' or a world about to be lost is in need of 'preservation' and the museum or heritage site bills itself as the best institution to perform this function . . . They are also objective manifestations of cultural, ethnic, or national identity, which outside the museum is often perceived as threatened by collapse and decay. (1996, 568)

In what has now become standard mode of analysis in heritage discourse, Gable and Handler (1996) suggest here that the morality of identity and loss as experienced through processes of modernity is often articulated and legitimated through official heritage policy and narratives. In cultural contexts where the past is employed to legitimate cultural histories and practices in the present, people are encouraged to hold sentimental attachments to material things that invoke collective, shared histories.

Such sentiments have been explored extensively over the last two decades, and indeed came up time and again in my own interviews with visitors to the HONO, particularly at the henge monuments. The material past is something to be experienced in a pure, unmediated way, separate from the trappings of modernity. The following comment from my research illustrates this, in that the visitor wants to experience the HONO monuments without the visibility of the present:

It [power lines] seems to destroy the natural setting of the site in a way. I mean it's, you know, you're standing here looking at things that are thousands of years old, and then you've got the wires, the telephone wires, you know, and you're surrounded by the modern, you've got all this modern stuff.

(Respondent Stones of Stenness-8, *Monuments in Practice*, McClanahan 2006, 145)

In defence of a similar view of heritage and embodied experience of the HONO WHS, one of the heritage professionals also defended the idea of unmediated encounters with the past. In The Orcadian (2007; [https:// www.wind-watch.org/newsarchive/2008/01/31/localconcerns-aired-at-merranblo-inquiry/](https://www.wind-watch.org/newsarchive/2008/01/31/localconcerns-aired-at-merranblo-inquiry/)), the individual notes that:

Visitors today value the open, natural, setting of these sites. Comparison with Stonehenge is often made, with many visitors commenting that they prefer the lack of development in the Orkney landscape. Supporting such sentiments, an individual who identified as a member of Orkney's artistic community also ardently defended this position in similar terms, invoking a number of themes to situate the case in relation to how identity is constructed around the material world, the power relations involved in development processes, as well as contesting the ways in which 'developers' as a sociocultural group are categorised as wishing to industrialise (and perhaps thereby commodify) a landscape that instead has 'intrinsic' rather than utilitarian value.

One respondent (Anonymous 2010) argued that:

[C]urrent forms of consultation are being latched onto by self-interested developers in an extremely disproportionate manner. This has also been true in local Council consultations where renewables developers and their paid consultants actually respond far more actively

than the general public who are suffering from consultation/volunteer fatigue, apathy of course and a distinct lack of spare time. There is also a silent majority who still naively believe that SNH, SEPA and planning legislation look after all interests in a – dare I say it – even and democratic manner. From what I have seen this simply is not the case. At Merranblo Public Inquiry we saw how private developers with full backing of the local councillors were quite happy to challenge, and lose if necessary, Orkney's Neolithic World Heritage Status for the sake of three badly sited wind turbines ... Orkney's west coast has provided Orkney with everything from official council logo, official Orkney 'The Brand' imagery, dozens of Orkney Business brochure covers and nearly every other Orkney Tourist Brochure cover that I can remember. Yet we are being told that for the good of the nation we must industrialise this view ... We have to be very careful not to ruin this image of Scotland and its islands. I honestly believed we had for the first time in a long time a Scottish government that was singularly proud of the nation's iconic landscape ... Little did I know that there were forces at work that put political expediency above natural heritage. The last planning guidance that quietly went out to regional authorities I'm told, read like a 'developers charter'! It costs money and real time to properly overview planning policy and strategy for the good of all, and of course it actually costs nothing to keep the obvious wild and beautiful pieces of each regions landscapes as they are and as visitors and locals expect them to be.

It seems that it was the final appeal to the morality of the loss of a kind of Northern aesthetic authenticity – both materially and in relation to perceived threats of 'cultural change' – if Orkney were to lose its vital tourist industry *vis-à-vis* the potential loss of World Heritage Status – that helped representatives of the Orkney Islands Council rejected the Merranblo project planning application.

## CONCLUSION

The practices of archaeological interpretation, conservation and curation are subject – just as any other realm of social life – to changing social and cultural values. Despite this, they are still largely presented by heritage management agencies as unproblematic and objective. This paper has shown that for nearly 200 years, the management and presentation of the monuments that constitute the HONO WHS, in particular the Stones of Stenness, have deployed tropes and aesthetics that can be construed as a kind of 'northern otherness', which portrays the Orkney Islands as authentic communities, whose landscapes and archaeological remains are steeped in deep histories that are alien to their southerly counterparts.

The 1906 partial reconstruction of the monument with an artificial dolmen structure in the centre, as interpreted by Walter Scott during his travels to Orkney, depicted later in his novel *The Pirate*, prompted negative feelings from some Orcadians who felt that such a false presentation impinged on its correct and intrinsic meaning and aesthetic value in relation to Orkney's history and landscape. This act of curation, coupled with the representation of the monument in the 1950s tabloid media as a

place where pagan ritual acts involving human sacrifice, led to acts of political and cultural resistance within Orkney.

The paper has also engaged with some contemporary ethical and moral questions surrounding how people understand preservation, conservation and the ways in which discourses of 'sustainability' are performed and contested amongst varying social groups at a particular WHS. Using the classic concept of 'the Commons', to illuminate various elements of how people tend to see and understand 'conservation' in relation to both the historic preservation of material heritage for the benefit of 'humankind'. Specifically, I examined how social groups and political organisations argue for harnessing forms of material 'heritage' for their potential economic benefits, and legitimate these stances through articulation of their interests within 'official' policy, mass media outlets and other documented community exchanges. It thus provides a case for examining how different types of philosophical discourse concerning conservation can come into conflict with one another in the context of 'managing' 'commons' resources like World Heritage Sites.

It has also outlined ways in which ethnographic approaches to the study of World Heritage Sites have been and are integral to gaining an understanding of the impact of heritage management practices on communities who live amongst them, as well as demonstrating that qualitative research can illuminate how conflicts and tensions surrounding WHSs are played out in practice amongst social actors with varying political, economic and cultural interests.

The arguments presented both for and against the Merranblo project all outline debates about how the conservation of 'living' cultures should be ensured, the well-being of humanity at large in relation to the stewardship of the natural world, as well as the potential 'loss' of culture through the loss of history and possible economic degradation in the globalised world.

As these examples show, archaeological remains have, since the advent of modernity, figured heavily as a symbolic medium for the negotiation and reification of power relationships between certain social groups from both within and without Orkney. The contested nature of the monuments also stems, in some ways, from active resistance to what are perceived to be 'outside' forces entering Orkney geography and culture, and acting in ways which are neither requested nor perceived to be needed. Such resistance in many ways originates from the highly mythicised historical context of Orkney's annexation to Scotland, at which time egalitarian land tenure, which underpinned an imagined culture of equality and 'classless society', was dissolved in favour of the adoption of social and political hierarchies under Scottish rule. The legacy of such historical events continues to have relevance today, and would no doubt further polarise political positions and cultural engagement with 'Scottishness' and Scottish identity, should the fetishisation of the kind of 'otherness' outlined here be reproduced in an independent Scotland.

## Notes

1 'Shopping Week' takes place in July of each year in the town of Stromness, Orkney's second largest population centre. The festival marks the middle of the summer season, as well as acting as a celebration of the town itself, which views itself as the primary 'rival' of Kirkwall, Orkney's capital. The annual event is marked by a parade which features a variety of floats entered by various community groups and individuals. The floats are usually satirical representations of the year's events, including politics, entertainment or local events or issues, as seen by Orkney residents.

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